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Eighth Edition

# Organizational Communication

**Approaches and  
Processes**

Katherine Miller  
Joshua Barbour  
Dajung Woo





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## Approaches and Processes



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Eighth Edition

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**Katherine Miller, Joshua B. Barbour, Dajung (DJ) Woo**

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# Preface

The “ages” of scholarly fields are notoriously hard to pinpoint, but most would agree that organizational communication has been around for over seven decades. The infancy of the discipline was marked by struggles for survival and nurturance from other disciplines. Today, organizational communication has reached a maturity few would have envisioned in the middle of the twentieth century. The field now encompasses a healthy eclecticism in that varied theoretical approaches provide contrasting yet complementary accounts of the ways in which communicating and organizing intersect. Of course, the field also has room to grow to further diversify its viewpoints and the kinds of organizations and people studied, as well as to understand the fast-changing nature of workplace environments, technologies, and values. A dynamic understanding of organizational communication helps us cope with our complex and changing world.

This book reflects the eclecticism of the field of organizational communication by providing various theoretical perspectives, rather than advocating a particular approach to the field. For example, a critical theorist, a systems researcher, and a scholar with a cultural perspective may all examine a particular organizational communication phenomenon—say, socialization practices—and find very different things. A critical theorist might focus on processes through which individuals are drawn into hegemonic relationships that reinforce the traditional power structure of the organization. A systems theorist might identify a cybernetic system in which the goal of organizational socialization is enhanced through structural and individual communication mechanisms. A cultural researcher might pay attention to how individuals learn and negotiate the values and norms of an organization during socialization processes.

All these approaches to organizational socialization process are limited in that each obscures important aspects. But each approach is also illuminating. Thus, early chapters of this book cover a gamut of approaches—from classical through human relations and human resources to systems, cultural, constitutive, and critical—as lenses through which organizational communication can be viewed. The strengths and weaknesses of each approach are considered, but no approach is presented as inherently superior.

Furthermore, we organize the voluminous research literature by considering various organizational communication “processes.” In doing so, we recognize that communication is not a static thing or event, but processes that unfold in relation to organizational practices and that can evolve in different directions. For example, decision making is far more than the meeting where decisions get made—it is a communication process by which people anticipate certain decisions, make sense of why certain decisions are important, decide who should have influence on the decisions, and respond to the consequences of the decisions. Our focus on organizational communication “processes” also helps us consider how communication phenomena are linked to multiple levels of organizations, instead of prioritizing a particular “level of analysis” (e.g., people engage in decision-making processes alone, in dyads, and in groups).

Our goals in the “processes” portion of the book are threefold. First, we wanted the processes considered to reflect current concerns of both organizational communication scholars and practitioners. Thus, in creating this 8th edition of the book, we incorporated recent theoretical developments from the growing literature, organizational examples from current news, and organizational experts’ latest suggestions from popular press. Second, we wanted readers to understand that each of the communication processes can be examined through a variety of theoretical perspectives. Thus, we conclude each chapter with a section on the insights of the approaches considered in the first half of the book.

Finally, we wanted each “process” chapter and its pedagogical features to include diverse examples to reflect the multicultural nature of many organizations today. In addition, we drew on organizational communication scholars of diverse backgrounds, whose research enriched our discussion of each process. Simultaneously, we acknowledge the influence of our own social identities and experiences on the choices we made in the writing process. Despite our individualities and different cultural backgrounds, the three of us (Kathy, Josh, and DJ) share the positionality as academics who earned PhDs and have worked in U.S. higher education institutions. As authors, we acknowledge potential biases we may bring due to our privileged positions, such as drawing on organizational examples and rationales based on the cultural, legal, and historical contexts of the United States—where our knowledge is strongest—more often than those in different parts of the world.

## Organization of the Text

This textbook explores the world of organizational communication in terms of scholarship and application. Most chapters consider either approaches that have shaped our beliefs about organizational communication practice and study (Chapters 2-6), or they consider specific organizational communication processes (Chapters 7-13). The first two chapters on “approaches” (Chapters 2-3) review prescriptive approaches—frameworks that make claims about how organizational communication should operate (Classical Approaches, Human Relations, and Human Resources Approaches). Then, the following three approaches chapters (Chapters 4-6) consider how we can best describe, understand, explain, and critique organizational communication (Systems and Cultural Approaches, Constitutive Approaches, and Critical Approaches).

When we move on to the “processes” chapters, we first consider enduring processes that have always characterized organizational communication in Chapters 7 to 10 (Socialization Processes, Decision-Making Processes, Conflict Management Processes, and Change and Leadership Processes). Then, in Chapters 11 to 13, we examine emerging processes that have come into play in recent decades (Processes of Emotion in the Workplace, Organizational Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Processes, and Technological Processes). These chapters are bracketed by an introductory chapter (Chapter 1) and a concluding chapter (Chapter 14) that put these approaches and processes into context by considering specific challenges in today’s world and how the study of organizational communication can help us deal with these challenges.

Those familiar with this textbook will note a number of changes from the seventh edition that will enhance students’ understanding of organizational communication. All of the chapters in this eighth edition have been updated to include current research and theory, leading to the addition of well over one hundred new references with particular emphasis on current events and contemporary research conducted by diverse communication scholars. In the “processes” chapters, we have added new theoretical developments and shifting perspectives, leading to a title change (Chapter 12: “Organizational Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Processes”), brand-new content sections (e.g., “technological affordances” and “sociomateriality” in Chapter 13), and new key concepts. We have also revised the learning objectives accordingly.

Like the previous editions of this book, features included in the chapters are designed to develop students' abilities to integrate and apply the material. The eighth edition includes all new "Spotlight on Scholarship" entries, highlighting recent research that illustrates concepts considered in the chapter. We also replaced all "Case in Points" from the previous edition with new ones to illustrate recent issues or news related to the chapter. Many of the tables and figures have been updated with new visual aids to help make the chapter content more engaging. "Case Studies" that appear at the end of Chapters 2 to 14 also continue from the previous edition; we have added two brand-new case studies and revised the other case studies with more contemporary and inclusive language.

Like earlier editions, this eighth edition is accompanied by an Instructor's Manual, revised, which includes sample syllabi; paper assignments; key terms; chapter outlines; true/false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and essay test items; suggestions for effective use of the case studies; and helpful websites. The Instructor's Manual also includes "Case Study," "Spotlight on Scholarship," and "Case in Point" features from previous editions. This edition also offers predesigned Microsoft PowerPoint presentations. These are available on the Instructor Companion Site, which also contains an electronic version of the Instructor's Manual.

## Acknowledgments

We thank the team at Cengage for making our revision process a seamless experience, including the reviewers who shared constructive feedback that helped us make the text more inclusive and accessible for diverse audiences. We are also grateful to organizational communication scholars for their ongoing commitment to research that is of such high quality and importance to real-world problems. As we worked on this revision, we found ourselves marveling at the development of our discipline's scholarship.

Each of us feels grateful to our support system for helping us achieve the daunting task of revising this book. DJ thanks Kathy and Josh for inviting her to be their coauthor, trusting her with this important project, and being incredibly gracious collaborators. DJ also thanks her mentors and colleagues for their encouragement and inspiration to do good work. DJ's daughter, Jiwoo, was eight months old when the revision process began, and thanks to the love and support of her husband, Mat, and her mom, Eulki, DJ was able to manage work-life boundaries relatively efficiently and fully enjoy the challenge of writing.

Josh thanks Kathy and DJ—a most amazing pair of collaborators and friends who helped him be a better scholar and writer throughout the revision process. He thanks Kathy for her support and mentorship all these years and for making space for him in this project. He thanks DJ for her creativity and tireless care—especially in those daunting chapters that intimidated him, and that DJ handled adroitly. Josh also thanks his partner, Jennifer, and children, Henry and Hazel, for their love and support. We finished the revision as Josh made an interstate move, and they were patient and encouraging as he worked surrounded by boxes, paper, and packing tape.

Kathy wrote the first edition of this book while her infant daughter napped, and that daughter turned 30 in 2023. Needless to say, Kathy has acknowledged a lot of inspirational people over many editions. So, for this one, she'll stick with just Josh and DJ. We were the well-oiled machine that classical theorists of Chapter 2 could only dream of.

**Katherine Miller**

**Joshua B. Barbour**

**DaJung (DJ) Woo**





## Chapter 1

# The Complexities of Organizational Communication

### Chapter Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should ...

- Be able to describe how today's world is complicated by globalization, global insecurity, climate change, and changing demographics.
- Understand how the concept of “requisite variety” and the increasing complexity of organizing make it essential to learn multiple approaches to the study and practice of organizational communication.
- Be prepared to apply more complex thinking about organizations by considering a variety of organizational forms and the reality that organizations are often paradoxical.
- Understand the distinction between a “transmission model” of communication and a “constitutive model” of communication.
- Recognize the seven conceptualizations of communication and how these conceptualizations can change our thinking about organizational communication.

As we reflect on societal changes in recent years, we notice that many have profound implications for organizational communication. Indeed, it's a long list. To begin, technological advances have enabled digital transformations, and the development of intelligent machines promises to transform how we work, play, and live; but they also bring new risks like cyberattacks and data breaches. Our ongoing societal reckoning with unconscious bias, discrimination, and persistent inequities make clearer more than ever the importance of working across differences and cultivating equity in organizations. The rise of the gig economy and tightening labor markets underscore recruiting and retaining the best people and a focus on employee well-being, work-life balance, and career development opportunities. Increasing concerns regarding environmental sustainability and public health have spurred organizations to undertake initiatives to protect the safety of people and the planet. All of these changes raise important ethical and social issues for individuals and the public at large. They illustrate the positive and challenging ways that organizational communication is complicated today.

Complexity is ubiquitous. Our relationships are complicated. Our families are complicated. Our work is complicated. Our politics and government are complicated. Our global

economy is complicated. Connections among nation-states are complicated. Our beliefs about ourselves are complicated. But nowhere is this complexity more apparent than in communication processes in and around organizations, institutions, and social groupings. There is little doubt that our organizational world is much more complicated than the world of 120 years ago (think of agriculture, increasing industrialization, and the birth of the assembly line) or the world of eighty years ago (think of moving to the suburbs and long-term, stable employment) or even thirty-five years ago (think of cross-functional work teams, the early years of the Internet, and the fracturing of the proverbial glass ceiling). We have moved from the age of Ford, in which you could have a car in “any color, as long as it’s black,” to the age of Starbucks and Amazon where the options are staggering. As advertising campaigns, in-store signs, social media influencers, and the person ordering in front of us remind us, there are thousands of ways to customize a latte. However, this is not to say that past times have not taught us a great deal about ways to understand the complexity of today’s world or to cope with the complexity that confronts us. Indeed, every day, we as individuals, families, organizations, and societies find ways to live productively in this complicated world.

This textbook takes you on a journey of understanding into the complex world of organizational communication. This journey will involve trips to the past to consider how scholars and practitioners have historically approached issues relevant to organizational communication. It will also consider a wide range of processes that make organizations complicated and help us cope with that complexity. These include processes of socialization, decision making, conflict management, technology, emotion, and difference.

In this first chapter, we will consider how today’s organizational world is complicated. This consideration will be brief and partial, and it will introduce some of the ways in which participants in twenty-first-century organizations are confronted with confounding and challenging problems. We will then consider strategies for thinking about the concepts of “organization” and “communication,” which will assist us on our journey of exploring approaches to and processes of organizational communication.

## Our Complicated World

There are myriad ways to illustrate the complexity of today’s world, and as we work our way through this textbook, we will discuss many of the “complicated” issues that confront us. In the final chapter (Chapter 14), we will consider how the landscape of organizational communication has changed in recent years and will continue to change in the future. In this chapter, we consider four aspects of our world that were barely on the radar several decades ago but that today dominate much of our thinking and discussion about organizations. These are globalization, global insecurity, climate change, and changing demographics.

### Globalization

It has become a truism to state that we now live in a global economy and participate in a global marketplace. As transportation and telecommunication systems improve, our world becomes ever more connected in economic, political, organizational, and personal terms. As one analyst summarized, “Welcome to the new global economy: One guy sneezes, and someone else gets a cold” (Bremmer, 2012). The emergence of a global economy was facilitated by key political changes, such as the end of the cold war and the development of the European Union (EU), and the emergence of a variety of institutions to help regulate the global economy, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

**Globalization** has led to practices such as **outsourcing**, in which businesses move manufacturing and service centers to countries where labor is less expensive but may also lack important labor protections. In a global economy, many organizations have a multinational or international presence, with employees of a single organization found

in many locations worldwide. Furthermore, in a global economy, businesses are no longer centered in a few Western nations but are also spread among nations throughout the developing world.

For many, the global economy offers exciting opportunities for entrepreneurs with the requisite skills. Globalization can also exacerbate problems such as domestic job loss, the exploitation of workers, and environmental problems. For example, though most of us know it as a social networking site, Meta's Facebook got into the business of providing Internet access because the only way for its user base to grow was to get more people online. These efforts focused on bringing access to the two-thirds of the world that are still not online, especially communities with limited means to do so on their own. At the same time, this effort raised concerns about Meta's power and reach, concerns that mirror criticisms of globalization generally (Solon, 2016). Similarly, we might question the extent to which capitalistic models for organizing developed in the United States should be exported to nations with very different governmental and cultural systems (Gill, 2013).

The impact of globalization became especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing new meaning to the one-person-sneezes-and-another-gets-a-cold aphorism. The pandemic made vivid the interconnections among our economies, workplaces, healthcare systems, crisis response organizations, public health, and even personal health and well-being across national borders. Not a single organization in the world has been unaffected by the pandemic—a kind of event where “old interpretations and responses suddenly become obsolete, and people must reinterpret their surroundings and craft new understandings of and solutions to a new set of problems” (Stephens et al., 2020, p. 427). For example, during the pandemic, national lockdowns disrupted the flow of goods and materials across nations, motivating organizations to optimize global supply chain processes through the use of advanced analytics. The pandemic also highlighted digital inequities in differing resources and abilities to go online, and those who could work remotely coped with isolation and learned to safeguard their mental well-being through meaning-making in the face of uncertainty (van Zoonen et al., 2022).

## Case in Point

### Working While Black During COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had workplace ramifications for just about everyone. For many months, a wide swath of employees worked remotely, often in cramped spaces while supervising kids who were learning from home. Those deemed as “essential workers” faced increased risk of infection as they worked in jobs ranging from health care to public safety to grocery stores. As more and more individuals were infected, the ramifications of illness and grieving also entered our work lives.

These effects were exacerbated for people of color, especially Black workers, for a number of reasons. Smith (2022), for example, explained this pattern of heightened impacts for Black women, noting that Black women are more likely to have frontline jobs labeled as essential, such as personal care aides and cashiers, putting them at increased risk for contracting COVID-19. Black women are also more likely to shoulder childcare responsibilities than their White counterparts. What's more,

Black women (and men) must also deal with racism in organizations and society and with microaggressions in the workplace that increase stress. As King et al. (2021) explained while we were all in the midst of it, “Black employees are exhausted” as “their cognitive, emotional, and physical resources have been disproportionately depleted due to two deadly and intertwined pandemics: COVID-19 and structural racism” (§1 1).

There aren't easy solutions to these problems, but King and her colleagues suggested a few basic, if partial, remedies. These include emphasizing the importance of rest, encouraging Black employees to say “no” when they need to, making space for collective healing, and positively affirming Black identity. In all, the authors emphasize the importance of organizations creating “environments where Black employees are welcomed to join, be themselves, lead, and thrive, despite adversity” (§1 15).

In sum, our new world involves complex interconnections between business, political, and cultural systems, making it difficult to fully understand the ramifications of both globalization and the proposed means through which globalization can “work” effectively. The field of organizational communication can contribute a great deal to these debates about globalization, including ways to protect the environment, push for equity, enrich intellectual and cultural difference, and promote individual and corporate well-being (Na’puti, 2019; Ruge-Jones et al., 2023). Questions that organizational communication scholars consider in the area of globalization include:

- How can organizational members communicate effectively in the contracted time and space of global markets?
- How can communication be used to enhance understanding in the multicultural workplaces that are a crucial feature of our global economy?
- How can communication processes in business, government, and nongovernmental organizations be used to protect the rights of workers in the United States and abroad?
- How does “organizing” occur in the realm of the political and economic policy debates that are critical to the long-term direction of the global economy?
- How do corporations communicate about the balance between providing goods and services at a price preferred by consumers and providing a safe and economically secure workplace for their employees?

## Global Insecurity

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States, changed the world in profound ways. In the years following 9/11, subsequent attacks in Madrid, London, Mumbai, Nairobi, Boston, Paris, Brussels, and elsewhere—combined with frequent news stories about attacks that have been thwarted and individuals arrested for planning more attacks—made terrorism a watchword in our lives (Stohl, 2019). Terrorists have been around for many centuries, and terrorism can be perpetrated by individuals, groups, nation-states, and regimes. Terrorism is not a particular ideology but a set of strategies that involves the use of unpredictable violence against individuals and thus creates ongoing fear and suspicion among large groups of people. The effectiveness of terrorism today can be enhanced by both the wide range of technological tools available to terrorists and contemporary urban environments that have high concentrations of residents and mass transportation.

Perhaps the most basic concern in the post-9/11 world is for an understanding of how terrorist networks and terrorist organizations are constituted, operate, and grow (Bean & Rice, 2019). Such an understanding would involve a consideration of how terrorist organizations recruit and socialize their members, how terrorist cells make decisions and develop leadership, and how terrorist networks form through technology and interpersonal contact. A focus on terrorist organizations points to a broader need to understand what Scott (2013) termed “hidden organizations,” such as the “shadow governments, clandestine groups, terrorist cells, crime cartels, undercover units...sects, cults, enclaves...secret societies...clubs, establishments, parlors” (p. 9) that operate in secret and shape modern life in ways that are unclear and difficult to discern but nonetheless important (Scott & Rains, 2020).

For example, Stoycheff (2016) set out to investigate the implications of post-9/11 mass surveillance of people around the globe by government agencies with the cooperation of telecommunications companies. Perceptions of surveillance practices and organizations’ justifications of those practices may limit our willingness to speak out online about policy concerns, potentially stifling democratic processes and public deliberation. Mass surveillance involves complex relationships between governmental organizations and the large organizations we trust with our phone calls, messages, and other digital traces, raising important concerns about privacy and security. In short, the organizational complexities implicated in our search for security and safety online and in person are staggering.



The implications of terrorism also include the **war on terror**, which refers to global counterterrorism campaigns. The war on terror meant increased military interventions that involve complicated communication processes in military actions and their bureaucratic support, as well as complexities of dealing with military personnel and their families during and after their service (Rossetto, 2015). Further, global insecurity has implications for organizational communication inherent in the complex political negotiations among a wide range of government entities and the rhetoric that frames and connects institutional goals and public opinion.

Organizational communication scholars can respond to these complexities of terrorism by asking critical questions regarding the development of communication systems for border security, tracking of possible terrorist activities, and the capabilities of first-response organizations—police departments, fire departments, hospitals, military—to act quickly and appropriately in case of terrorist threats or attacks. Organizational communication scholars can also consider **homeland security**, which refers to the organized efforts of governments to ensure safety and resilience against terrorism and other dangers. At times, these questions will concern public relations and crisis communication. At other times, these questions will involve how organizations manage the daily operations of security, such as airport security or the passport application process. For example, research by Malvini Redden (2021) highlighted how standing in security lines heightens the emotions of today’s travelers. At still other times, organizational communication scholars can contribute by bringing a critical understanding to high-level policy debates in which conflicts arise between the need for security and the preservation of civil liberties.

In sum, our post-9/11 world illustrates the complexity of questions confronting organizational communication scholars and students regarding the war on terror and homeland security. These questions include:

- How do terror networks and other hidden entities organize, recruit, and socialize members and communicate across time and space?
- What communication systems can and should be put into place to best ensure security?
- How can we help prevent our fear of terror from becoming a fear of each other?
- How can we best deliberate policy and make decisions in the changed environment of our post-9/11 world?
- How can communication systems be designed to protect and enhance the well-being of individuals who serve as first responders?

## Climate Change

Humanity’s role in **climate change** is an issue that can no longer be denied and must be addressed by governments, businesses, and individuals. Increasing attention has been drawn by scientific data about upward shifts in overall global temperature and extreme weather events. Climate change has intensified heatwaves and made wildfires more common and more dangerous. The position that global warming is happening due—at least in part—to human activities is the consensus among hundreds of scientific associations, including the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS), and the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA, 2022) summarized it in basic terms: “Scientific evidence continues to show that human activities (primarily the human burning of fossil fuels) have warmed Earth’s surface and its ocean basins, which in turn have continued to impact Earth’s climate. This is based on over a century of scientific evidence forming the structural backbone of today’s civilization” (¶ 1).

Scientists have already observed widespread effects from climate change. Sea levels are rising, glaciers are shrinking, and permafrost is melting. These changes in the natural

environment have led to additional changes in plant and animal life as growth patterns change in response to shifting environmental conditions. These changes are occurring on land and underwater, as climate change affects vast ecosystems and threatens the survival of some, such as coral reefs. Global warming also influences weather events, such as hurricanes, which gain strength over warmer ocean waters. But these changes are not necessarily consistent across the globe or even predictable. Record winter cold in parts of the world can coincide with record heat and wildfires elsewhere—drought in one region and massive flooding and torrential rains next door. Climate change, like the problems of global insecurity discussed above, makes all the more important the efforts to mitigate and respond to disasters, including the looming mega disasters that stretch the imagination as much as they stretch the organizational infrastructures meant to respond to them (Barbour, et al., 2020; Rice & Jahn, 2020; Lai & Tang, 2021).

The role of organizational communication in climate change and global warming is widespread. Much of the human contribution to climate change can be traced to factors that began with the Industrial Revolution, such as our systems of energy production, factory manufacturing, and petroleum-fueled transportation. Thus, when searching for ways to reverse or at least slow the process of climate change, these industrial organizations play key roles. Organizational communication is also implicated in the debates about global warming and what to do about it. These debates are global ones because the world is still industrializing, and there are arguments about nations' obligations to reduce greenhouse gases—especially nations like the United States that have historically produced the vast majority of the gases. These debates are further complicated by the gap between scientific and public perceptions regarding climate change. Thus, organizational communication is implicated in the representation of ideas about climate change to the general public and the broader need to encourage sustainable organizational practices (Mitra, 2018).

Organizational communication is also important in dealing with environmental problems, including many of the effects of global warming, such as the increased incidence of forest fires and extreme weather events. Communities may reasonably question whether organizations such as public utilities have the decision-making capability, policymaker support, and infrastructure needed to deal with serious disasters such as extreme hurricanes and ice storms in areas unaccustomed to them. Finally, addressing global warming and climate change can open up opportunities for businesses that want to raise their level of environmental responsibility and sell themselves as “green” companies to consumers.

For example, Patagonia, a luxury clothing and outdoor adventure equipment company, has positioned itself as an “ideal corporate citizen” through its environmental activism and strategic engagement with environmental controversies (Dawson & Brunner, 2019, p. 60). Such efforts can help organizations build relationships with communities, policy-makers, and regulators that help them advance their interests and reduce business risks (Xu & Woo, 2023). Although there is debate about the extent to which “going green” is a move that businesses should take for the overriding goal of protecting the planet or only when it can affect the bottom line, it is clear that an increasing number of organizational executives are making decisions about their businesses with environmental considerations in mind.

Thus, the field of organizational communication must be ready to deal with the complex questions that stem from climate change and global warming, including:

- How can organizations reinvent themselves to reduce or eliminate their contributions to global warming and embrace sustainable organizational practices?
- How can government representatives engage in productive debate about ways nations can work together to influence climate change?
- How can entrepreneurs address the “greening of organizations” as an opportunity for both profit and social responsibility?

- As climate change increasingly affects local weather events and patterns, how should local, state, national, and international agencies coordinate their activities to cope with the human consequences of global warming?
- How do organizational and government representatives speak to various publics about ways in which energy policy and practices influence the environment?
- How can organizations effectively enhance awareness of the ways in which individuals can make a difference in influencing the process of climate change?

## Changing Demographics

Compared to issues like globalization, global insecurity, and climate change, the concept of **demographics** sounds pretty tame. Demographics refer to statistical descriptions of characteristics of a population, such as age, race, income, educational attainment, and so on. In one sense, these descriptions are simplistic, but they are also undeniably important. Demographics describe who we are in the most basic of terms and thus can have a foundational impact on how we communicate with each other, how we organize, and how we address critical problems. Changing demographics have coincided with social movements emphasizing social justice and equity, underscoring the need to reckon with systemic inequities (Williams et al., 2023) and the inadequacy of existing organizational approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Ballard et al., 2020).

The most typical way to think about demographics is to consider distributions of the characteristics of people and to compare those distributions across time and location. In the United States, for example, the demographic trends are found through a national census completed each decade and through the tracking of other research centers. Consider a few recent trends:

- Prognosticators have claimed that the United States is anticipated to be a “majority minority” nation in the middle 2040s, but the notion of “majority minority” itself is problematic. Changing ideas about race and ethnicity in the United States and across the globe mean old categorizations fit less and less well. In fact, the fastest growing racial or ethnic group over the next several decades in the United States will be people who identify as two or more races (Vespa et al., 2020). The rapid growth of those who identify with multiple racial and ethnic groups is enough to “challenge the forecast of a majority-minority society, even by 2060” (Alba, 2018, p. 3).
- The changes are also driven by growth among individuals who identify as Hispanic and/or Asian. By 2060, it is estimated that the Hispanic portion of the U.S. population will grow to as high as 28% (Vespa et al., 2020), and individuals who identify as Asian Americans are the fastest growing group (Budimen & Ruiz, 2021). These demographic changes and how we conceptualize and communicate about them matter for organizational communication because long-standing inequities persist in organizations along racial and ethnic lines, and because terrorist groups, such as White supremacist organizations, make misleading claims about these changes to justify discrimination and hate.
- Married couples now constitute less than half of all American households, including different- and same-sex couples, and only one fifth of households fit the outdated image of married couples with children. This pattern marks a sharp contrast to the middle of the twentieth century—in 1960, 75% of households included married couples and 44% of households were married couples with kids (VanOrman & Jacobsen, 2020). Even in 1960s, stereotypical notions of family were far from the norm, and they are even less so now. Working-age people, especially, are now less likely to marry and more likely to cohabitate (Fry & Parker, 2021). Thus, household size increased, upending a long-term downward trend as individuals moved in together to deal with rising housing costs (Fry, 2019). These changes have important implications for how we navigate work-family boundaries in organizations today.

- The rural U.S. population is now the smallest it has ever been—14% now compared to 72% in the early years of the twentieth century. In contrast, a third of Americans live in cities, and over half of Americans live in suburbs (Parker et al., 2018). At the same time, recent analyses have pushed back on orthodox notions of rural, urban, and suburban, pointing out that rural America is also diverse and increasingly so (Love & Loh, 2020).
- The world is getting older, and the United States is no exception (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019). By 2060, nearly a 25% of individuals in the United States will be over 65, compared to 15% in 2016 (Vespa et al., 2020).

In terms of sheer description, then, the United States is a dramatically different place than it was in decades past. The different descriptors of who Americans are, where they live, who they live with, and how long they live lead to dramatically different experiences as we encounter organizations and communicate in and about them. For example, consider the issue of age. Scholars have divided populations into **generational cohorts** that indicate similarities in birth year and associated similarities in experience. Although generational boundaries can be difficult to nail down (King et al., 2019), generational groupings help us understand the implications of shared cultural experiences such as the Cold War, the civil rights movement, the rise of the information age, the COVID-19 pandemic, and changing ideas about work.

In the United States, roughly, current generational cohorts include the “Silent Generation” (born approximately in the 1925–1945 time span), “Baby Boomers” (1946–1964), “Generation X” (1965–1980), “Millennials” (1981–2000), and “Generation Z” (2001–2020). Millennials now make up the largest generational group (Fry, 2020). Over time, each generation’s experience of work shifted, as does the cultural sense of each cohort. For example, Baby Boomers are known for ambition and a belief that organizational systems can solve problems. Generation X is thought to be flexible and skeptical, Millennials competitive and civic-minded, and Generation Z entrepreneurial and progressive (e.g., “Generational Differences in the Workplace,” 2023).

Even though these characterizations of the cohorts tend to be overblown, our beliefs about generational differences can affect how we relate to each other (King et al., 2019).

## Case in Point

### Working for 60 Years?

One important demographic fact that has changed drastically over the years is life expectancy. This change is driven by advances in medicine and improvements in health and hygiene. For example, those born in 1920 could expect to live to an average of fifty-four, while those born in 1960 could expect to live to about seventy (higher for women, lower for men). Though events in the world occasionally lower the lifespan we can expect (for example, the COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental impact on this demographic), the trajectory has largely been upward for centuries. Indeed, a report recently predicted that perhaps as many as half of today’s five-year-olds could live a century or more (Pinsker, 2021).

Sounds great, right? Perhaps. But living to one hundred could mean you’ll be working for sixty of those years, and that might not be quite so appealing. Would you want sixty years of nine-to-five pressure? Sixty years of trying to balance work life

and home life when the pressures of both can be overwhelming? That doesn’t sound quite so ideal.

The trick to making that sixty-year career more palatable may lie in changing the nature of work and how we work throughout our lives. As Pinsker (2021) pointed out, the demands and pressures of life are often distributed unevenly over the decades. In midlife, just when we may be hitting our stride in a career, there are also kids and perhaps older parents to care for. It’s a lot to juggle. In retirement, we often go from working hard to not working at all. But what if we could even out those bumps? Perhaps we could work fewer hours when the pressures of home life are at their height. Perhaps we could reconceptualize retirement so it’s not an on/off switch but a gradual glide into a more leisurely life. As Pinsker argued, such changes could, “miraculously, make a sixty-year-career feel manageable” (§ 7).

Such descriptive reports also capture generational shifts—such as Millennials’ and Generation Z’s prioritization of work-life balance—and highlight the need for strategies to communicate across differences in organizations. Similar demographic analyses could be applied to race, ethnicity, family structure, social class, household composition, and geographic difference, which would reveal how the workplace is evolving as these demographic patterns shift.

Changing demographics also create new opportunities and challenges for organizational communication because they result in multicultural workplaces, including workers with increasing responsibilities to aging family members; workers with longer commutes; and workers who telecommute. Changing demographics also magnify the importance of treating individuals with different ethnic backgrounds, races, ages, genders, abilities, and sexual orientations in ways that honor these differences and create opportunities for meeting both individual and organizational goals. Thus, questions confronting organizational communication scholars as they consider these demographic shifts include:

- How can we communicate with members of a diverse workforce in ways that value difference and help achieve organizational and individual goals?
- How do members of the “sandwich generation,” those who might be caring for parents and children, cope with the stresses of work and family concerns?
- What are the communication patterns and needs of individuals from different age groups?
- How can we use communication technology to design virtual workplaces for employees in a variety of locations?
- How do we make decisions regarding the roles of institutions and government in supporting an aging workforce?
- What role does communication play in assuring a level playing field for individuals with disabilities?

From this brief consideration of several newsworthy facets of the twenty-first century, it is clear that we live in a complex world and that organizational communication can play a pivotal role in addressing these complexities. It is important, though, to consider the ways in which our thinking about organizational communication can best facilitate our ability to make a difference in today’s world. One important organizational theorist who can help us in this is a scholar named Karl Weick, who we will encounter later in this book, Chapter 4. Weick has a lot to say about how we organize and make sense of organizing through ongoing interaction. At this point, though, it is helpful to consider one concept that Weick emphasized: **requisite variety**. This concept suggests that successful organizations and groups need to be as “complicated” as the problems that confront them. For example, the organizational structure of a small catering service can probably be relatively simple. However, if that small catering service grows into a large restaurant or an even larger food service organization, the structure needed for decision making, payroll, customer service, training, and myriad other functions must become increasingly complex. The organization must be as complicated as the problem.

The same principle holds for our consideration of how we should think about “organizational communication” as a means for approaching the challenges of today’s world. We have talked about issues such as globalization, global insecurity, climate change, and changing demographics as just a few of the complexities that must be dealt with through organizational communication. Thus, if we think of these problems as complicated, we must also complicate our thinking about organizations and communication.

## Complicating Our Thinking about Organizations

The first way of complicating our thinking about organizational communication is to complicate our thinking about organizations. In the first edition of this book (Miller, 1995), Kathy defined organization as including five critical features—namely, the existence of



a social collectivity, organizational and individual goals, coordinating activity, organizational structure, and the embedding of the organization within an environment of other organizations. These critical features still hold today, but in complicating our thinking about organizations, it is important to stretch our understanding of each of these concepts. For example, when we think about the idea of “structure,” we need to consider more than basic hierarchical structure or even more complex team structures. We also need to consider structures based on collective and communal relationships, structures that eschew hierarchy in favor of flat organizational forms, and structures that cross boundaries of time and space. When we think about the concept of “goals,” we need to move far beyond the economic goals that are often assumed in discussions of the “bottom line.” The goals that drive many organizations and individuals today involve changing the world in big and small ways or perhaps simply concern about “connection” itself.

When we work to stretch our thinking in these ways, we can recognize that many examples of organizational types exist in today’s world that were not often considered in past decades. To take a basic example, we often think about “businesses”—entities that are designed to make money—as the epitome of organizations, but scholars are now increasingly interested in communication processes in nonprofit organizations (Koschmann & Sanders, 2020) as well as organizing that happens outside of formal, orthodox organizational structures (Cruz, 2017). For both profit and nonprofit organizations, more and more organizations can be characterized as service organizations rather than manufacturing organizations. Around the globe, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are especially important in coordinating processes of change (Albu, 2023). It is increasingly common for individuals with similar needs and goals to come together in organizations known as cooperatives (coops) that are often motivated by a concern for democracy, social justice, and environmental and global responsibility. Furthermore, with advances in communication technologies, organizations often do without the brick-and-mortar physical location and operate as virtual organizations. We need to stretch our thinking to understand that the features of an “organization” are also relevant for the consideration of social organizations, such as fraternities and sororities, or even families or groups of friends who are coordinating around valued goals and tasks.

## Complicating Our Thinking about Communication

It is also important for us to complicate our thinking about communication if we are to deal with the complicated world that confronts us. Early models of communication were highly simplistic, arguing that communication could be conceptualized with a model such as the S-M-C-R model, in which a Source transmits a Message through a Channel to a Receiver. In the organizational context, this could be a supervisor (source) asking for volunteers to work on the weekend (message) through an e-mail (channel) sent to all her employees (receivers). Even when a “feedback loop” is added to this model (e.g., responses to the e-mail), it still fails to encompass the varying ways we need to think about communication. Communication is not just about sending simple messages to one or more receivers. Communication is also about the intricate networks through which computers link us to others. Moreover, communication is about the creation of meaning systems in families and cultures, understanding a market segment to enhance persuasion and increase sales, and the multiple ways information must flow to provide aid when a natural disaster strikes. It is about framing information about a possible threat, so the public is warned but not panicked. Communication is about coming to an understanding within a community about issues that both unite and divide.

Robert Craig (1999) proposed a model of communication theory that helps sort out these various aspects of communication. First, he contrasted a **transmission model of communication** with a **constitutive model of communication**. In a transmission model, communication is a way of moving information from sources to receivers, similar to the S-M-C-R model. In a constitutive model, communication is conceptualized as a “process that produces and reproduces shared meaning” (Craig, 1999, p. 125). We will consider in

Chapter 5 how the notion of “constitution” has been applied in detail to organizational communication processes. Craig suggested that the simple distinction between transmission and constitution is not particularly helpful, though, when considering broader theoretical approaches to communication. For one thing, he argued that it is not really a fair fight, as the transmission model is usually just presented as something easy to knock down. Craig also believed that the transmission model can be useful to consider in some cases. For example, when the goal is to get evacuation information to residents in the path of a hurricane, the effective transmission of information is a lot more important than the creation of shared meaning. In sum, Craig did not think we should stop at the simple choice between a transmission model and a constitutive model. Instead, he suggested we complicate our thinking.

Craig argued that we should recast the constitutive model of communication as a meta-model—an overarching way of thinking about communication. That is, if we take the constitutive model as a “model of models,” it is possible to constitute communication in a wide variety of ways. These different ways of constituting communication can provide different avenues for the development of theory and research. But more importantly, for our purposes here, various ways of constituting communication can help us deal with different practical challenges that organizations face today, such as how to design communication processes, formats, and tools. That is, there will be times when it is important to think about communication as a way of getting information from one person to another. There will be other times when it is important to think about communication as shared dialogue and a way to enhance understanding about self and others. There will be other times when communication is best thought of as a means of persuasion and motivation. Thus, Craig’s metamodel of communication can help us meet the practical challenges of today’s organizational world.

Craig proposed seven **domains of communication theory**—seven different ways of thinking about how communication works in the world. These are presented in Table 1.1, and they range from the notion of communication as information processing (the cybernetic model) to communication as the experience of otherness and dialogue (the phenomenological model). Table 1.1 also considers how each way of thinking about communication might be put into play in organizational contexts. It should be clear that these various approaches to communication allow us to answer—and, perhaps more importantly, to ask—very different questions about how organizations and people work.

**Table 1.1** Approaches to the Concept of Communication

	Communication Theorized As:	Possible Use in the Organizational Context:
<b>Rhetorical</b>	The practical art of discourse	Considering the communication strategies of organizational leaders during times of crisis
<b>Semiotic</b>	Intersubjective mediation by signs	Studying the ways that organizations create and sustain identity through corporate symbolism
<b>Phenomenological</b>	Experience of otherness; Dialogue	Using dialogue to mediate conflict between two employees
<b>Cybernetic</b>	Information processing	Finding optimal ways to set up a communication network system for employees who telecommute
<b>Sociopsychological</b>	Expression, interaction, and influence	Using knowledge about personality and interaction style to improve conflict management programs
<b>Sociocultural</b>	(Re)production of social order	Examining the intersection of organizational, national, and ethnic cultures in multinational organizations
<b>Critical</b>	Discursive reflection	Confronting the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace through programs designed to shift beliefs about gender and power

Source: Craig, R. T. (1999). Communication theory as a field. *Communication Theory*, 9, 119–161.

In summary, then, our world is becoming increasingly complex, and the intricate situations that arise with globalization, global insecurity, climate change, and changing demographics require multifaceted approaches to understanding. Indeed, even without these issues, life in organizations is complex enough! Thus, it is critical to complicate our thinking and discussion about “organization” and “communication.” In the final pages of this chapter, we will preview the remainder of the book to consider how these ideas about organization and communication will be brought to bear on traditional and contemporary approaches to the study of organizational communication and on a wide range of organizational communication processes.

## The Chapters Ahead

Chapters 2 and 3 will take us back to consider several “founding perspectives” that have influenced the study of organizational communication. These approaches originated in other academic fields (e.g., sociology, psychology, management) and in business and industry; they provide the foundation on which the field of organizational communication stands. Several aspects of these founding approaches are important to note. First, although these schools of thought provide the historical backdrop for our study of organizational communication, they are not “dead” subjects. Indeed, the influence of these approaches is still widely evident in organizations today, and our discussion of them will consider both their historic and current significance. Second, these approaches are largely prescriptive in nature. That is, these theorists were primarily interested in prescribing how organizations should run rather than describing or explaining how they actually do run.

Chapter 2 will take us back to the early part of the twentieth century to explore classical and bureaucratic approaches to the understanding of organizational communication. In Chapter 3, we will move to the middle and later years of the twentieth century to consider two related approaches: human relations and human resources. In human relations approaches, the spotlight is on individual needs; in human resources approaches, it is on the role of employees as valued contributors to organizational functioning.

In Chapters 4 through 6, we will consider more contemporary ways of thinking about organizations that shift the focus in several ways. First, these contemporary approaches present ways to understand and explain organizational communication, as compared to the founding approaches that prescribe how organizations should function. Second, the contemporary approaches are primarily used by scholars rather than practitioners; although, of course, there are important pragmatic implications that stem from all these approaches. Third, all these approaches continue to exert substantial influence today in terms of how organizational communication is studied, which is evident from research published in current academic journals. Each of these chapters is briefly reviewed below.

Chapter 4 will consider two metaphors that guided the study of organizational communication during much of the latter part of the twentieth century and continue to exert influence today. The first of these, the systems approach, treats organizations as complex interactions of systems components and processes. The second, the cultural approach, considers organizations emergent entities of values, norms, stories, behaviors, and artifacts. In Chapter 5, we will examine a set of ideas that hold great currency in today’s study of organizational communication—the notion that organizations are constituted through communication. In Chapter 6, we will turn to critical and feminist approaches that emphasize various aspects of organizational power and control and aspire to the emancipation of marginalized voices within the organizational context.

In the second half of this textbook, we will move our focus from approaches that inform our understanding of organizational communication to the specific processes to which these approaches have been applied. What do we mean by process? Simply, it is something that happens in an organization. Organizations are marked by constant activity.

People learn about new jobs, make decisions, deal with conflict, cope with customers, program computers, form alliances, institute change, and cope with differences. All these communication processes have been the focus of organizational communication scholars, and the last half of this book will consider our knowledge about what happens in these processes, how it happens, and why it happens.

The first four chapters—Chapters 7 through 10—consider enduring organizational communication processes that have probably been happening in organizations for as long as organizations have existed. In Chapter 7, we will consider socialization—or the processes by which individuals become integrated into organizations. Chapter 8 investigates how communication influences organizational decision making and knowledge management, and Chapter 9 presents theories and research on the role of communication in organizational conflict. Then, in Chapter 10, we examine change in organizations and the leadership processes that are crucial in making meaningful change.

In the last four chapters of this textbook—Chapters 11 through 14—we will consider some of the organizational communication processes that have emerged in the last twenty to thirty years as the workplace has changed and evolved. These “emerging” processes in organizational communication certainly existed in past organizations, but current developments in the workplace have brought these issues to the forefront, and they increasingly demand the attention of both organizational practitioners and researchers. In Chapter 11, we will consider the fundamental shift in the way we have come to think about organizations and the people in them—the shift from assuming organizational processes as always “rational” and “logical” to acknowledging the role of emotions in organizational life. In Chapter 12, we discuss the importance of celebrating diversity and achieving equity in the workplace, considering how communication can shape and be shaped by various differences people bring to organizations—including, but not limited to, race, culture, gender, ability, and sexual orientation. In Chapter 13, we examine how organizational technologies shape the ways in which we communicate, work, and think about work. Finally, in Chapter 14, we conclude in much the same way we began—by considering changing trends of the organizational landscape and their implications.

## Discussion Questions

1. How have organizations that you work in or have dealings with been affected by issues such as globalization, global insecurity, climate change, and changing demographics? How do these issues have different effects on different people and different kinds of organizations?
2. Consider how airports, train stations, bus depots, and other transportation hubs deal with security. What organizational communication processes have changed as a result of the threat of terrorism? Do you think these hubs have dealt effectively with these changes? Why or why not?
3. What kinds of organizational structures and processes stem from globalization? Why are these new structures and processes necessary? How do they enhance—or detract from—the quality of life for individuals working in or with the organizations?
4. How would each of the seven communication domains considered in this chapter approach the organizational issues that arose in the aftermath of events such as oil spills, bombings, or tornadoes? How do these different lenses help us understand the complexity of organizational communication processes?

## Key Concepts

globalization  
outsourcing  
war on terror  
homeland security  
climate change  
“green” companies

demographics  
generational cohorts  
requisite variety  
transmission model of  
communication

constitutive model of  
communication  
domains of communication  
theory



## Chapter 2

# Classical Approaches

### Chapter Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should ...

- Understand the ways in which a machine metaphor provides insight into organizational communication.
- Appreciate the historical context of the early years of the twentieth century when classical approaches to organizing were proposed.
- Be familiar with Henri Fayol's Theory of Classical Management, especially his principles of management regarding structure, power, reward, and attitude.
- Know how Max Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy corresponds to Fayol's ideas and be able to discuss the forms of authority that Weber described as existing in organizations, especially bureaucracies.
- Be able to describe the key aspects of Frederick Taylor's Theory of Scientific Management and explain how his ideas responded to the concerns about industry in his time.
- Understand how communication processes are influenced by the Theory of Classical Management and be able to recognize its principles applied in contemporary organizations such as in employee analytics and workplace surveillance.

Before the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, most work was conducted by individuals or in small groups. Goods were created by individual artisans, by families, or in small “cottage industries” in which workers with years of experience accomplished large tasks from start to finish. For example, consider a shoemaker during the eighteenth century. A cobbler during this time would put together a shoe from tanned leather to finished product (and perhaps tan the leather too). Clearly, this is a different type of organizational process from today's shoe factory.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the late nineteenth century, common methods of producing goods began to change. Instead of cottage industries, increased mechanization and industrialization led to the organization of larger groups of people in factory and assembly-line settings. Scholars and consultants in the early twentieth century tried to make sense of these new organizational forms and provide business and industry with advice about how best to organize in light of these new developments. A number of theories gained prominence during this period, including Henri Fayol's Theory of Classical Management, Max Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy, and Frederick Taylor's Theory of Scientific Management. We will consider the details of each theory